Selkirk Ecosystem

Area Description

The Selkirk Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone, approximately 2,200 square miles in size, includes the Selkirk Mountains of northeastern Washington, northern Idaho, and southern British Columbia. Approximately 47% lies within B.C. with 53% under U. S. jurisdiction. The U.S. portion includes the Salmo-Priest Wilderness, portions of the Colville and Idaho Panhandle National Forests, Idaho Department of Lands holdings, and scattered private parcels. The B.C. portion includes provincial Crown lands, Harrop-Procter Community Forest, provincial parks (West Arm, Stagleap), Nature Conservancy Canada Darkwoods property, and other private holdings.

Topography is characterized by long, steep-sloped drainages. Evidence of past glaciation includes U-shaped valleys, cirque basins, and numerous mountain lakes. Elevations range from 1,700 to 7,800 feet. The Pacific maritime-continental climate is characterized by long winters and short summers with the majority of precipitation occurring during the winter followed by a second peak in spring.

Seasonal Habitat

Spring habitat includes low-elevation wet meadows and riparian areas, especially in the Priest Lake basin. Other spring range includes low elevation areas on the eastern edge of the recovery zone in the Kootenai Valley, the lower portion of the Pack River, the area adjacent to the Pend Oreille River in Idaho and Washington, and south-facing avalanche chutes and open hillsides throughout the recovery zone that green up early due to their southern exposure.

Berries, especially huckleberries, make up the primary diet of bears throughout the summer and fall. Huckleberries are widely distributed throughout the ecosystem.

Population Status and Distribution

In 1999, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a “warranted but precluded” finding to uplist the Selkirk Mountains recovery zone population to endangered status.

Despite this ruling, grizzly bears appear to be expanding both in numbers and distribution in the Selkirks. A recent population study in a portion of the ecosystem in British Columbia estimated about 35 animals. A similar number likely exists in the U.S. portion of the ecosystem and an ongoing population estimation study using DNA obtained from grizzly bear hair is currently underway to test this assumption.

Grizzly bear distribution is not restricted to the designated recovery zone. Grizzly bears have been documented throughout Game Unit 1, so people need to be aware of proper food storage techniques and to keep garbage secured. Black bear hunters need to be especially aware and take the time to properly identify black bears.

Threats and Concerns

Human-caused mortalities have and continue to affect recovery efforts in this ecosystem.

Deaths due to mistaken identity by black bear hunters are preventable if hunters take the time to properly identify their target. Bear hunters are encouraged to learn to identify black and grizzly bears in the wild. Montana and Wyoming game departments currently have bear identification training programs available on the internet (http://fwp.mt.gov/bearid/default.html ; http://gf.state.wy.us/bearid/). These links are provided for educations purposes. Idaho hunters are not required to pass the test to purchase a black bear tag.

Sanitation, including the proper storage of food, securing garbage, and the intentional feeding of birds and other wildlife, is an increasing issue affecting grizzly bears in the Selkirks. In 2007, a male grizzly bear became food-conditioned and habituated to humans because he had free and easy access to black sunflower seeds in bird feeders and corn that was placed out for deer. The bear lost his natural fear of humans, became a threat to human safety, and was shot and killed by Department personnel in October.

Genetic isolation is also a factor in this population. Recent DNA analysis indicates that Selkirk grizzly bears have been relatively isolated from other grizzly bear populations and as a result the Selkirk population has decreased genetic diversity. As the range of the grizzly bear expands in this area the genetic isolation may be reduced. However, increasing human densities and the development of valley bottoms that separate this population from others may inhibit movements between populations.

For information, concerns or emergencies involving grizzly bears contact:

Idaho Department of Fish and Game –
- Panhandle Regional Office, Coeur d'Alene, ID; (208) 769-1414
- Regional Wildlife Biologist (Bonners Ferry): 208-267-3116

U.S. Forest Service –
- Panhandle National Forest –
  - Bonners Ferry Ranger Station: 208-267-5561
  - Sandpoint Ranger Station: 208-263-5111
  - Priest Lake Ranger Station: 208-443-2512